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S E C R E T AMMAN 006535

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: ISLAMIST ABU SAYYAF POSES CHALLENGE TO GOJ IN MA'AN

REF: A. AMMAN 341 B. FBIS GMP20021031000084

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

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GOJ ENCOUNTERS TROUBLE IN MA'AN...AGAIN  
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11. (C) Jordanian Security Forces are currently engaged in a tense standoff with Islamist activist Mohammad Shalibi aka Abu Sayyaf, which started when the PSD attempted to take Abu Sayyaf into custody on October 29, at a road block on the Desert Highway near Ma'an in Southern Jordan. Abu Sayyaf (accused of being the local leader of the rejectionist Islamic group takfir wa hijra) has been wanted by the Jordanian authorities for his involvement in stirring up protests in Ma'an--a city with a history of anti-government unrest--after a January incident involving the death of a local boy in police custody (see ref A). Abu Sayyaf resisted arrest and a firefight ensued in which Abu Sayyaf and two PSD officers were injured. PSD were unable to arrest Abu Sayyaf, who escaped with the help of heavily armed local tribesmen and he remains at large in the Ma'an area. According to RSO contacts in the PSD, the PSD has no evidence linking Abu Sayyaf with the Foley assassination and Abu Sayyaf has publicly denied any connection to it (although he was quoted in al-Quds al-Arabi as saying he was pleased with the "operation"--Ref B). The current situation poses a difficult challenge of authority for the King in a city that has periodically over the past two decades, seen similar tensions erupt.

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KING PREPARED TO ACT WITH FORCE  
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12. (S) British Ambassador Prentice told the Ambassador November 6 that he had raised the situation in Ma'an during a dinner conversation with King Abdullah on November 5. The King was well briefed on the situation, and understood the actions and statements of Abu Sayyaf and his supporters to be a direct challenge to government authority in the city. The King commented that his security officials had tried thus far to deal with the Ma'an situation with a "light approach" given the interplay of tribal and religious factors. "But enough is enough," the King told Prentice. Murderers and those responsible for public disorder must be brought to heel, he said.

13. (S) The King said he understood that Abu Sayyaf and his men were well armed, including with rocket propelled grenades (RPG's). Possession of RPG's, the King commented, is illegal, and if the government does not deal with the situation, it will only get worse. The King told Prentice that he had ordered security agencies to give Abu Sayyaf forty eight hours to surrender himself to the police. If he did not, the King said, he had ordered the security forces to resolve the standoff with force.

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COMMENT  
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14. (S) Ma'an -- an economically depressed area with strong tribal views and a significant presence of Salafi and Takfiri adherents -- has long been a center of opposition to the government. Over the past twenty years, Ma'an has been the scene of unrest and rioting over bread and gasoline price increases. We have been watching the current difficulties brew over the past week, and believe they may soon reach a crisis point.

15. (S) That said, we do not see any popular reverberation of recent events in Ma'an in other areas of Jordan, nor do we feel a groundswell of similar anti-government feeling in other population centers. Nor should we connect these events to the tragic murder of USAID Officer Larry Foley (although some in the press have done so, and may again). In the end, these latest troubles in Ma'an are a serious, but local, challenge to government authority from a town that has periodically challenged the government in the past.

GNEHM